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Reforming Pakistan's Educational System: The Challenge of the Madrassas

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The author examines the history and functioning of the Madrassa school system in Pakistan, which he sees as a fount of Islamic fundamentalism in that country, and a potential source of recruits for militant Islamic extremism.

Key Words: Pakistan, education, Madrassa schools, Islamic fundamentalism, Wahabiism, Jihad.

Introduction

The field of development economics has, over the years, produced a number of general principles to guide countries in their efforts at improving the lot of the average citizen. Many of these take the form of a vicious cycle, with perhaps the most pervasive one being that poverty causes illiteracy and illiteracy causes poverty. No country today better exemplifies this cycle than Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan remains a country where most education plans and policies have failed to make any significant contribution to increase literacy rates, improve employment opportunities, and enhance quality of life for the poor². In turn, the country's poverty and underdevelopment has made it difficult to mobilize the funds needed to significantly upgrade the nation's educational system.

As a result, poverty is an increasing problem for the country. A recent World Bank Report³ notes that while the educated and well-off urban populations in Pakistan have standards of living similar to their counterparts in other countries of like income range, the urban poor and most of the rural population are being left behind. While poverty has always been a major problem facing the country, its increase is a recent phenomenon. More troubling, the incidence of poverty may even be

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² Andleem Abbas, "The Human and Social Capital Deficit," *The News International* December 1, 2002

³ *Annual Report 2003* (Washington: World Bank, 2003).

increasing – rates which had fallen substantially in the 1980s and early 1990s started to rise again towards the end of the decade. Currently around 33 percent of the country's population can be classified as poor. More importantly, differences in *per capita* income across regions have persisted or widened.

Pakistan's fight against poverty is complicated by two main factors: (a) high population rate of growth – roughly 2.4 percent per annum; and (b) limited resources to devote to education. Both of these factors have resulted in the inability of the Government's efforts at expanding educational opportunities to keep pace with the demographic development. Only a very small proportion, around 2% of Pakistan's GNP goes to the education sector. This is considerably below the minimum of 4.5 per cent called for by UNESCO. School attendance and literacy rates continue to be among the lowest in the world. Although roughly 75 per cent of school-age children go to primary school, only 25 per cent obtain a completion certificate. Pakistan's literacy rate, is near the bottom – 142nd place among 167 states.

Given the Government's dire financial straits, the recent growth of private schools might seem to be a blessing. Unfortunately this is not entirely the case. Secular private schools, while producing well qualified graduates⁴, can not accommodate the poorer segments of society. On the other hand ever growing number of Koran schools, which are absorbing an increasing number of children from the poorest sections of the population, limit themselves to imparting the teachings of the Koran and, in some cases, tend towards radical Islamic indoctrination. For this reason, Pakistan's Madrassa system of Islamic education has come under intense scrutiny, particularly in the wake of the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001.

The debate over the Madrassas evokes images of jihad, warfare training, terrorism and an archaic system of education. Most of these perceptions are a result of generalizations and oversimplification of a complex phenomenon. The dilemma is that many Madrassa indeed play a role in violence and conflict. However, many others have a key place in

⁴ Zafar Mueen Nasir, "Do Private Schools Produce More Productive Workers?" *The Pakistan Development Review* 38:4 Part II (Winter 1999), pp.937-952.

Pakistan's religious and social life.⁵

The country's future appears to be at a turning point – will Pakistan make the commitment to education necessary to eradicate poverty and prepare the country to compete in an integrated world economy or, will the majority in the country remain mired in poverty and despair? – easy prey to radical groups. Will the country have the will to channel the Madrassas away from violence and conflict and towards a more productive role in the country's economy and society? For his part, President Musharraf has emphasized the theme that "Pakistan is a moderate Muslim country." He has spoken of his country's "greater jihad against illiteracy, poverty, and hunger," and enthusiastically detailed his hopes for reshaping his country's crumbling educational system and reforming its controversial religious schools.

The sections below examine the country's educational system, with particular emphasis on the Madrassa. How does this system operate? What are the system's main limitations? What reforms is the Pakistani government currently undertaking to reorient the seminaries to serve the country as a whole? What actions characterize these reforms as distinct from earlier attempts? What is the nature and extent of opposition to them? What are the main implications for the international community in assisting the country's efforts at educating its population?

The Madrassa System

Historically Pakistan's religious schools, or Madrassas were founded as centers of learning for the next generation of Islamic scholars and clerics. As Singer⁶ notes, however, during the 1980s the Madrassa system changed significantly. First, as part of its Islamization policy the Zia regime stepped up funding for the schools. Funds were dispersed at the local level to institutions deemed worthy of support by religious leaders, creating new incentives for opening religious schools. At the same time,

⁵ *Pakistan: Madrassahs, Extremism and the Military* (Geneva: International Crisis Group, July 29, 2003), p.1

⁶ P.W. Singer, *Pakistan's Madrassahs: Ensuring a System of Education Not Jihad* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2002):

<http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/views/papers/singer/20020103.htm>

the war in Afghanistan produced millions of refugees and the radicalism of a jihad movement⁷.

It all started under the patronage of the United States in the wake of the Soviet occupation of Kabul. The then U.S. president, Jimmy Carter established a 500-million dollar fund for preparing mujahideen to fight against the occupying Soviet forces. Later on, four billion dollars were provided for this purpose and the project was given the title of "Operation Cyclone." It primarily aimed at promoting jehadi culture in Pakistan. Establishment of Islamic seminaries was an integral part of it. The results have been astonishing: the number of traditional religious schools in Pakistan rocketed from 700 in 1980 to 20,000 in 2000. The number of religious parties has also unusually grown. There were only 30 such parties in the country in 1979. Now we are burdened with 237 of them⁸.

Today, the schools are funded both by private donations from Middle Eastern countries and by the "zakat," a 2.5 percent tax collected by the Pakistani government from the bank accounts of Sunni Muslims once a year. The tax results in millions of dollars each year being directed to the schools. Foreign donations come mainly from rich individuals and Islamic charities in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. As a result countries like Saudi Arabia have had a disproportionate influence on school curriculum and orientation. Many are dominated by a Saudi type of Wahabiism/Deobandiism and teach a more extreme and puritanical version of Islam.

There are five distinct types of Madrassas in Pakistan, divided along sectarian and political lines. The two main branches of Sunni Islam in South Asia – Deobandi and Bareile – dominate this sector. Ahle Hadith/Salafi Muslims have their own schools, as do the Shias, while the predominantly Sunni Jamaat-e-Islami shuns sectarian tags and maintain Madrassas distinct from the sectarian ones. The religious, and doctrinal

⁷ While growth has been rapid in Pakistan for the unique reasons noted, other countries are also experiencing a surge in numbers. Cf. Leslie Lopez, "Even as Islamic Schools Face Scrutiny, They Gain Popularity in Malaysia," *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2001.

⁸ <http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/feb2003-weekly/nos-23-02-2003/lit.htm>

differences of these schools vary considerably.⁹

The precise number of Madrassas is unknown. The Ministry of Education puts the figure at 10,000, though he acknowledges the problem of definition and suspects it could be higher, with as many as one million to 1.7 million students attending classes, at least for a short period. Part of the uncertainty over the number of Madrassa students stems from the fact that most do not complete their education or appear for the final graduation examinations.¹⁰

The major reasons for the popularity of the Madrassas in Pakistan include the fact that the country's public school system is in shambles, and many families cannot afford even the small fees that are charged. Expensive private schools are out of the question for these families. Madrassas offer an attractive alternative: free education, free meals, free schoolbooks and even in some cases a stipend. Though some middle class and rich families also send their children to Madrassas for Qur'anic lessons and memorization, they are usually day students.¹¹ Finally, many have attracted foreign students.

Unfortunately, many of the Madrassas have built extremely close ties with radical militant groups, both inside and outside of Pakistan. In this capacity they have increasingly played a critical role in sustaining the international terrorist network. The most famous of the Madrassas in Pakistan is in the town of Akora Khattak, 70 miles from Islamabad. The alumni of the Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqania reads like a who's who of the Taliban regime¹². Eight Taliban cabinet ministers and dozens of provincial governors and military commanders graduated from the Madrassas. In fact, the Taliban movement, which took its name from the Arabic word for "students," was born in the Madrassas of Pakistan. Just as troubling:

The Deobandis (after a north Indian town where the doctrine originated) practice a fundamentalist creed marked by obscurantism, hatred

⁹ Pakistan: *Madrasas, Extremism and the Military* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 29, 2002), p.1

¹⁰ Pakistan: *Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*, op. cit. p. 2.

¹¹ Pakistan: *Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*, op. cit. p. 1.

¹² A similar situation exists in Indonesia. Cf. Timothy Maples, "Indonesian School Has Chilling Roster of Terrorist Alumni," *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2003.

of Western civilization and Jews, misogyny and violent dislike of Shiite Muslims. Their seminary curriculum contains little but indoctrination in their radical philosophy. Not surprisingly, students often graduate functionally illiterate, with virtually no job skills, but thoroughly prepared for a career in extremism and jihad....Since approximately 15 percent of the students come from foreign countries, virtually all Islamic terrorist groups around the world have benefited from this 'educational' system¹³

Ministry of Education officials speculate that 10 to 15 percent of Madrassas might have links with sectarian militancy or international terrorism. The government admits though that these statistics are unreliable. The lack of credible data makes reform more problematic. It also underscores both the extent of official neglect and, conversely, the special treatment received by a select group of Madrassas.

One thing is clear, the growth of the Madrassas in Pakistan reflects the ascendance of religious extremism in the country. The sources of this extremism are complex, but at least four factors have played a significant role¹⁴: (1) The extensive Saudi funding for exporting Salafi/Wahhabiism to the subcontinent and for keeping religious reactionaries at bay in seminaries set up in regions at a distance from the Kingdom; (2) Reliance on religious elements by the military high command and civilian autocrats (like Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif) to promote anti-democratic agendas; (3) Anti-Americanism generated initially by the pro-Israeli U.S. commitment and fuelled subsequently by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; and (4) The organizational zeal of the Jamaat-i-Islam which enabled it for the time being to gather disparate religious groups under the umbrella of the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) – the coalition of religious parties that won the provincial elections in the NWFP and Balochistan in October 2002.

In addition to their role in terrorism, the schools are a concern because of their non-technical, non-scientific curriculum. Many teach only religious subjects to their students, focusing on rote memorization of Arabic texts. In essence they are producing a generation of students

¹³ Alex Alexiv, "The Pakistani Time Bomb," *Commentary* 115:3 March 2003, p. 48.

¹⁴ Ibid

unlikely to play a productive role in creating the type of modern dynamic economy necessary to reduce the country's grinding poverty. Accounts of the daily life of students at Madrassas detail this grim picture:¹⁵

Crouching on a threadbare carpet, the young boys rocked backwards and forwards, their voices blending into a medley of high-pitched chants. They sat cross-legged beside a low wooden bench on which were propped copies of the Koran. A row of 20 white-capped heads bobbed to and fro as the boys pored over their texts. Their bearded teacher, perched on a cushion at one end of the dark, crowded room, appeared indifferent. He ignored his tiny charge, aged between six and eight, as they concentrated on memorizing all 6,666 verses of the Koran, learning two words of the Arabic text at a time¹⁶.

With their spartan classrooms and stern teachers, Pakistan's Madrassas seem to owe more to Charles Dickens than Islamic tradition. Each of the boys engaged in memorizing the Koran had risen before dawn for morning prayers. They had begun studying their verses at 7am and would continue, with a two-hour break, until 6 pm. More prayer and study would follow until 11pm, when the lights at the Jamia-ul-Faridia Madrassas in central Islamabad are mercifully switched off¹⁷.

Their graduates are unable to multiply, spell their own names in English, find their nation, or for that matter any other country on a map and are very ignorant of everyday happenings in the world¹⁸.

In the obscure Madrassas impressionable young minds are taught a distorted and unnatural version of Islam, hatred, murder of innocent civilians including other Muslim men, women, and children in the name

¹⁵ David Blair, "Sought-After Schools Where the Only Lesson is Learning the Koran: Madrassas Flourish Despite Controversy," *The Daily Telegraph*, September 11, 2002, p. 11.

¹⁶ Blair, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Blair, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Murtaza Ali Shah, "Madrassahs: Breeding Grounds of Terrorism," *The Asian Outlook.Com* <http://www.theasiangooutlook.com/31janmadarsas.htm>

of jihad and martyrdom through suicide attacks to earn place in heaven. As a compulsory part of their education, most of the religious schools include weapons and physical training in their regimen, as well as fire branded lessons on speechmaking where rhetoric is memorized against America and liberal politics. These students, most of whom coming from extremely poor background, are uneducated, young, economically dependent on the schools, and cut off from contact with the outside modern world and their families for years at a time, thus the likeliness of their being programmed to become fanatic and violent for the sake of religion is extremely high¹⁹.

In sum, the crux of the problem comes down to the type of education the Madrassa imparts. Education that creates barriers to modern knowledge, stifling creativity and breeding bigotry, has become the Madrassas' defining feature. It is this foundation on which fundamentalism – militant or otherwise – is built.

However not all Madrassas are alike. While many offer only the most rudimentary math and science others are more sophisticated, aiming at the same level of education found in Pakistan's more-elite schools. One of the better funded Madrassas is the Anjuman Faizul Islam in Rawalpindi. Here boys and girls – nearly 700 of whom are orphans – study together up until fifth grade, and then continue their studies separately until grade 10²⁰.

This Madrassa's library is full of books in both English and the national language, Urdu, from "Gone With the Wind" to "How to Build a Hydropower Dam". The chemistry lab would not look out of place at any American public school. The curriculum includes Islamic studies, to be sure, but the emphasis is on achievement, not on Islamic political causes²¹.

The extent to which Pakistan's Madrassas are innocent – if austere – institutions offering a valuable education to poor children, or dangerous

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Scott Baldauf, "Pakistan's Two Schools of Thought," *Christian Science Monitor* October 3 2001 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1003/p7s1-wosc.html>

²¹ Scott Baldauf, op. cit.

hotbeds of Islamic zealotry²² is a central question for the Pakistani authorities. The other main issue concerns the ability of the government to undertake reforms given the rise and recent electoral successes (October 2002) of the country's religious parties.

Madrassas Reforms

For more than two years the government has been trying to revamp the country's school system, together with weeding out extremist Islamic educators.²³ As expected, much of the focus of these efforts has been on finding ways of regulating and reforming the various Madrassas.

Madrassa Registration Ordinance

To this end, on June 19, 2002 the federal cabinet approved the Madrassa Registration Ordinance 2002, in force immediately, to regulate religious schools by bringing them under the formal educational system of the country. According to the ordinance, Madrassas must register with the Pakistan Madrassa Education Board and the respective Provincial Madrassa Education Boards. A key aspect of the Ordinance is that unregistered Madrassas will be prohibited from receiving Zakat funds, financial assistance, grants, donations or other benefits from the federal government or provincial governments. Madrassas violating the Ordinance risk closure or a fine or both.

The government is also trying to persuade the schools to teach science, mathematics, English and Urdu. This would provide students with the option, now usually lacking, of eventually enrolling in professional schools²⁴. The government has gone so far as to suggest that Madrassas would receive government aid only if they begin providing what could be termed a "modern education"²⁵.

²² A detailed account of Madrassahs links to terrorism is given in: O. N. Mehrotra, "Madrassa in Pakistan: The Chief Promoter of Islamic Militancy and Terrorism," *Strategic Analysis* 23:11 February 2000.

²³ Ilene R. Prusher, "Musharraf vs. the Mullahs: A Fight for Islamic Schools," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 30, 2002. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0130/p07s01-wosc.html>

²⁴ A number of innovative programs are being introduced in other countries. Cf. Timothy Maples, "In Indonesia, Contentious School Looks to Teach Both Islam and Western Subjects," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2002.

²⁵ Elizabeth Rubin, "Can Musharraf Reform Jihadi Culture?" *Christian Science Monitor* January 24, 2002.

According to the Ordinance every registered Madrassa is to maintain accounts and submit an annual report to their provincial education board. A registered Madrassa must not receive any grant, donation, or aid from any foreign sources, or allow admission to foreign students or make appointment of teachers without valid visa and a "No Objection Certificate" from the Interior Ministry.

The plan is ambitious and very necessary. But by itself it will take years before the effects start to show. It is already apparent that change will not come soon to the Madrassas. Not only are many religious groups violently opposed to any government interference, but the Ordinance is not compulsory. In practice, because of pressure from the clergy, the only penalty for not registering a Madrassa is that it will not be eligible to receive any government funding. Even this limited incentive is undercut by the fact most of the schools receive little or no government funding to begin with. In August of 2002 after intensive lobbying by clergy leaders, the Musharraf Administration has pledged to water down the Ordinance.

In short, any suggestion of change in the traditional sector of Islamic instruction makes the clergy suspicious of government intentions. They are willing to teach non-religious subjects but 'secularization' is their worst fear, and they vow fiercely to resist it. The clergy have a long and successful history of opposing governmental reform plans and preserving the religious bias and traditional format of Madrassa education. Madrassas have become the fiefdoms of their clerics, who jealously safeguard autonomy because it gives them unchecked control of finances, their students and what they are taught.

Removing Destabilizing Elements

On the other hand the government has been more successful in removing a major destabilizing element the foreign jihadis. Pakistan has been host to thousands of foreign jihadis since the 1980s. In most cases, their home countries were not willing to take them back, and these jihadis feared persecution if they returned to countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Algeria. Those who did not participate in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal moved to Pakistan. Jihadi Madrassas provided them sanctuary and the Pakistan military other

jihads to fight. These foreign jihadis also fought alongside the Taliban. Hence, the inflow of Arabs continued even during the 1990s.

The Arabs differ from Pakistani and Afghan jihadis in many respects. In particular they have an affinity for the more rigid and radical Ahle Hadith and Deobandi sects and strongly reject local cultural variations of Sunni and Shia Islam. Compared to Pakistani and Afghan counterparts, Arab jihadis are usually from well-off families and thus become a source of funding for their Pakistani hosts. They also help their Pakistani patrons network with likeminded individuals and groups throughout the Middle East. The Musharraf government has ordered that no Madrassa should accept new foreigners unless they have a permission certificate from their own countries and are properly registered with the interior ministry.

In March 2002, the government identified 300 foreigners for expulsion from Pakistan and said another 7,000 were under scrutiny. It is not known, however, how many have actually been sent back to their countries or handed over to the U.S. for terrorism investigation. What is known is that hundreds voluntarily left the Madrassas when a crackdown became imminent.

Madrassa Reforms Project

Apparently, frustrated at not making much progress in regulating the Madrassas the government has recently (June 2003) shifted its approach more towards one of cooperation. Specifically it has opted to provide a number of incentives to persuade the religious lobby into adopting a standard approach towards their education.

The government's plan is an effort to bridge the existing gulf between the mainstream formal education system and the traditional Madrassas through forming an integrated system of national education by modernizing the Madrassa curriculum.

To implement this plan the federal government signed (June 19, 2003) a Memorandum of Understanding with the four provinces, Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (Fata), Federally-Administered Northern Areas (Fana) and Azad Kashmir to reform 8,000 Madrassas during the next five years. Under the new arrangements, a Madrassas Reforms Project has been launched and an amount of Rs 225 million

has been allocated in the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP) 2002-03 for this purpose.

Hopefully the project is to establish and strengthen lines of communication between the Madrassas and the government. The goal is also to educate 1.5 million students, both male and female, in a manner that will enable them to continue their studies in colleges and universities education. This is to be accomplished through the introduction of formal subjects (which have otherwise been considered as non-religious subjects) such as English, Mathematics, Pakistan Studies, Social Studies and General Science at the primary and secondary levels. At the intermediate level, English, Economics, Pakistan Studies, and Computer Science will also be taught.

The government has also planned to fund the salaries of the teachers to be appointed to teach non-religious subjects. A salary of Rs 4000 would be given to teachers for teaching formal subjects at the secondary level and Rs 10,000 at the intermediate level. The cost of textbooks, stationary items, sports facilities and utility charges and one-time grant for the library and furniture facilities is also covered under the scheme.

The question now is: will the religious schools accept this scheme? As in the past most Madrassas are firmly opposed to any outside reform in their syllabi or education system. Their biggest suspicion is that every government move in this direction is a Western-inspired maneuver to gain control over Islamic institutions to change the Islamic education and values to suit the West. Moreover, many administrators of the Madrassas feel there is no need to modify or reform their syllabi or education system because it is in line with the teachings of Quran and Hadith, and fulfills the basic purpose of learning Islam i.e. to preach and promote it. As for the Government's plan to impart modern education in seminaries, they claim to be already providing a basic modern education with their own resources and without any outside help.

Several quotes²⁶ are instructive:

Qari Hanif Jallundhari, secretary-general of Wifaqul Madaris ul Arabia Pakistan (the Madrassa education board for Deobandi school of

²⁶ From Asim Hussain, "No Thanks," *The News International* June 29, 2003.

thought):

The Madaris Reform Project is not a sincere offer to help Islamic institutions and is actually a part of a global conspiracy to deviate us from our basic purpose – to teach Quran and Hadith.

Hanif Jallundhari, who is also the convener of the alliance of all madrasa boards of different schools of thought in Pakistan:

We are fully aware that modern education is beneficial for ulema and religious scholars. We have been successfully imparting these subjects and have never requested for any government help because we never felt it was a difficult job.

Dr Sarfraz Naeemi, principal Jamia Naeemia Lahore and secretary-general Tanzimul Madaris Pakistan (Madrasa Board for Brelvi school of thought):

This project has not been initiated by the Pakistan government and the U.S. is behind this move to suppress the growing Islamic influence which is resiliently rising after the U.S. aggression on Afghanistan and has now gained momentum after the recent war in Iraq.

The British colonialists had tried to do the same by suppressing Islamic education in the subcontinent but our ancestors left the cities to reside in far away towns to protect the Islamic education system. The West has always tried to pollute the Islamic values of morality, decency and brotherhood. And for this basic purpose it has always been keen to introduce its cultural waywardness, family planning methods and obscenity on media into our society.

Pir Saifullah Khalid, principal Jamia Manzoor ul Islamia Lahore:

Our education standard is far higher than the one prevalent in government institutions. Our students go through those courses in fourth year which the government institutions impart to their students during MA Islamiyat.

Maulana Abbas Naqvi, secretary-general Wifaqul Madaris al Shia:

We will never accept any conditional aid that amounts to interference in our independence and sovereignty which is supreme for us.

We have resisted all such moves in the past and will continue to resist any attempt aimed at curtailing our independence.

Given this sentiment and the long history of the Government's failed attempts at change, there is certainly reason to believe that progress will not be smooth and rapid. Added financial resources will be a key element and ultimately this will involve the cooperation of the international community.

Role of the International Community

A start has already been made in this direction. The Madrassa reforms being proposed now directly involve the Western countries. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group²⁷ recommended that the donor community should hold the Pakistani government to its commitments on Madrassa reform, and particularly urge it to: (a) close Madrassas linked to banned extremist groups; (b) establish a regulatory authority under the interior minister with sufficient powers to overcome clerical resistance; (c) end involvement of intelligence agencies in the Madrassa sector; and (d) provide financial assistance to government programs to reform the Madrassa education sector.

Attempts to reform the Madrassahs will be difficult because students have few alternatives for education, and Pakistan will not make much progress in its reform efforts without looking past the Madrassahs and taking a comprehensive approach to the educational system as a whole. Given the country's limited financial resources and qualified educational personnel, the success of this effort will depend largely on the generosity of the international financial community.

Fortunately gaining broad based donor support for educational assistance is facilitated by the fact that there is broad agreement among economists and other social scientists that education plays a crucial role in the country's economic development. This view has been further strengthened by some recent research on endogenous growth, which has found both theoretical support and empirical evidence in favor of a positive relationship between economic growth and capital formation²⁸.

²⁷ *Pakistan: Madrassas, Extremism and the Military* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 29, 2002).

²⁸ Norman Gemmell, "Reviewing the New Growth Literature," *New Political Economy* 3:1

In the context of Pakistan, a number of studies have been done to assess the extent and nature of the relationship between education and a large variety of other variables²⁹. Butt³⁰ has found that five or more years of farmer's education lead to increased farm and labor productivity, reduced use of farm labor, and increased use of yield augmenting inputs like fertilizer. Azhar's³¹ finding that farmer's education results in a significant increase in the farm output by increasing technical efficiency leads further support to the belief that expansion of education in rural areas would help the development of the agricultural sector. Khan³² concluded that literacy causes increased productivity in the manufacturing sector. A study of gender wage differential by Ashraf and Ashraf³³ reveals that a significant percentage of the wage gap between males and females can be explained by the difference in their characteristics including education.

The studies of the rates of return to education referred to above generally give positive value for the rates of return to all the levels of education. This means that by investing in education one can increase his/her life-time earnings. Improved access to quality education is one of the most effective means of lifting the large segments of the population out of poverty.

The problem of mass illiteracy, educational inequality, and inefficiency need to be solved as soon as possible. Clearly, the policy of free education through public schools which has been in effect for decades has not gone a long way in this direction. This makes a new carefully targeted approach towards providing and financing expanding educa-

1998, pp 129-133.

²⁹ Najam Us Saqib, "A Critical Assessment of Free Public Schooling in Pakistan," *The Pakistan Development Review* 37:4 Part II (Winter 1998), p.969.

³⁰ M.S. Butt, "Education and Farm Productivity in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Applied Economics* 3:1 1984, pp. 65-82.

³¹ Rauf A. Azhar, "Education and Technical Efficiency in Pakistan's Agriculture," *The Pakistan Development Review* 27:4, 1988, pp. 687-

³² Shahrukh R. Khan et al., "Causality Between Literacy and Labor Productivity in Pakistan," *Economics of Education Review* 10:2 1991, pp. 245-251

³³ A. Ashraf and B. Ashraf, "Estimating the Gender Wage Gap in Rawalpindi City," *Journal of Development Studies* 29:2 1993 pp. 365-376.

tional opportunities absolutely essential.³⁴

Singer³⁵ has explored several of the options that might be worth considering. Logically, and perhaps with international financial and technical assistance the Pakistani authorities could pursue one or more of the following options:

- Developing a public Madrassa system as an alternative to the current private Madrassas.
- Developing a secular public education system that provides Pakistani families with a superior alternative to the Madrassas.
- Developing alternatives and supplements outside the formal educational system.
- Obtaining educational aid from a variety of international sources.

Option 1 given the country's limited supply of educational facilities and qualified teachers, might appear to be an attractive short term solution. As Singer notes, publicly managed Madrassas exist throughout the Middle East, teaching the tenets of Islam, but also providing a more modern curriculum. Here international assistance could focus mainly on providing various educational materials and supplies. A major problem is that the schools would be hard to monitor for performance.

Option 2 while one might argue that from a social point of view the public school system is doing a good job in achieving the goal of universal education, the quality of public school education is a serious problem. In the majority of the cases, schools are over-crowded with inadequate teaching staff. The standards set for the employment of teaching staff are not properly observed. The pay scales offered to the teaching staff are also not very attractive. On top of this, there are no monetary or non-monetary incentives for teachers to improve their qualification. Therefore teachers show little or no interest in their job. There is no system to monitor the performance of these schools and, therefore, dropout rates are very high. The schools follow an outdated

³⁴ Najam Us Saqib, "A Critical Assessment of Free Public Schooling in Pakistan," *The Pakistan Development Review* 37:4 Part II (Winter 1998), p.970.

³⁵ Singer, op. cit.

syllabus with no meaningful link to the job markets faced by graduates.³⁶

Option 2 would definitely entail considerable international financial assistance. However, rough cost calculations indicate that this might be a promising option. Estimates are that the international donor community could build a school for several hundred children for \$60,000 and operate it for \$10,000 a year. This would appear to be an extremely cost effective alternative.

Option 3 is a final alternative noted by Singer. This course of action would largely involve expanded international donor sponsorship of technical schools and other centers of learning within Pakistan. No doubt this would be a popular alternative for many students. As the government's economic reforms begin to bear fruit the demand for trained and skilled graduates will grow rapidly. More importantly, without a steady stream of qualified graduates, the country would have a hard time restoring growth in the 5-6% per annum range.

With regard to *Option 4*, while many international organizations would like to assist Pakistan's attempts at improving public education, the country does not meet all the conditions to qualify for many types of assistance. For example, the World Bank has recently targeted Pakistan and twenty-two other developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America to spearhead a campaign to educate all children by 2015. Unfortunately Pakistan, together with India, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria, currently falls short of the Bank's minimum criteria for receiving financial aid. The Bank has set two requirements for countries seeking financing: they must have a fully developed "poverty reduction strategy"; and they must be effectively implementing an education plan that donor nations have agreed to. As part of its relationship with the IMF, Pakistan currently has a poverty reduction strategy in place. The international donor community could be of considerable assistance in helping the Pakistani government develop a comprehensive educational plan that could draw financing not just from the World Bank but also from other international agencies and NGOs.

³⁶ Zafar Mueen Nasir, "Do Private Schools Produce More Productive Workers?" *The Pakistan Development Review* 38:4 Part II (Winter 1999), p. 937-38.

Conclusions

For more than a generation, Pakistan's social divide has been drawn in this Muslim nation's schools. Westernized middle- and upper-class families send their children to private schools, usually nondenominational. The poor attend either inadequately funded public schools or the Madrassas³⁷.

It is naive to think that the threat posed by many of the Madrassas can be entirely remedied by government pressure. This is a short term solution that fails to tackle the poverty and despair that fuel the Madrassas' appeal. The only way to decrease the attraction of Madrassa schools in the long term is to offer access to alternative educational institutions that promise to build a more prosperous, equitable and stable society. This is particularly important for the poorest segments of the population, who have traditionally been denied access to education³⁸.

Clearly educational reform will be one of Pakistan's most important challenges in the months and years to come. Fortunately, the country has a number of viable options for moving away from the current dysfunctional system. Pakistan's progress in this area may be the most critical determinant of whether the country becomes a moderate, progressive nation joining the world community, or whether it descends into increased poverty, isolation, and instability.

³⁷ Scott Baldauf, "Pakistan's Two Schools of Thought," *Christian Science Monitor* October 3, 2001 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1003/p7s1-wosc.html>

³⁸ Fiaa Shah, "Poverty and Hopelessness that Fuel Religious Schools' Appeal," *Financial Times*, September 6, 2002.